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Author(s): Jay Berkowitz and Todd Packer

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Heroes in the Classroom:

Comic Books in Art Education

BY
JAY BERKOWITZ
AND
TODD PACKER

"I think the only real difference between fine art and commercial art is a deadline." (Caputo, 1997, p. 62)

How would you like to put some "POW!" into your arts instruction? A lesson in comic books—history, design, story, and production—can make your classes come alive! In the following article, we present some background, guidelines, and a lesson plan to help you use comics and cartoons in developing these artistic skills of students. So, as they say, "Up, up and away!"

Comics and cartoons provide a wealth of pedagogical opportunities. By placing comics in historical, aesthetic, educational, and empowering contexts, we present a new approach to using these materials to build artistic skills and involve students in art appreciation. After a brief history and critical analysis of comic books and cartooning, we provide a lesson plan and guidelines for using these materials in teaching children and adults.

Why Comics?

Many art teachers have met students who state that they hate drawing or that they can't draw—yet often these students get reprimanded by other teachers for drawing in class instead of paying attention. These students may even have a notebook full of drawings that were produced every place except in an art class. Why?

As an art teacher, Berkowitz has noticed how many students interested in comic books and cartoons did not perform well in art class. Students who could not stay focused in a 40-minute art class would spend hours drawing comic book characters. They also were interested in comic book history.

Comic books and cartooning can be valuable for art teachers, but little has been written about these in the literature of art education. Brent and Marjorie Wilson (1976, 1977, 1980) suggest that children should be permitted to copy comics. Other educators have written of using comics to educate children (Smith, 1985; Marston, 1944). Scott McCloud's (1993, 2000) sophisticated analyses of comics, presented in comic book format, provide ample resources for links between comics and art history. His definition of "comics" as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (p. 9) provides a frame to link traditional art history to the medium of comics. Will Eisner (1995), a renowned comics artist, places comics in the history of art, literature, and storytelling with analysis of graphic narrative; he defines "comics" as "The printed arrangement of art and balloons in sequence, particularly as in comic books" (p. 6).

Comic books are a big business and a major presence in the lives of children and adults. According to Caputo (1997), "In recent years, comic book sales have exceeded \$4 billion worldwide." Many adults, including teachers, grew up reading comic books, and they form a background for many cultural and visual references.

Students can learn traditional art concepts through the history and design of comic books. For example, children who like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles™ will also be interested in learning about the artists after whom they were named (Michelangelo, Donatello, Raphael, and Leonardo). Batman fans would be interested to learn that his costume was originally based on a drawing by Leonardo Da Vinci. The students could even be introduced to fine artists such as Roy

Lichtenstein or Roger Shimomura, who use comics as a source of inspiration in their work.

As a motivational and educational tool, comic books can be used with adults and children in a variety of teaching and training settings. Teachers can focus on line drawing technique, history, aesthetics, empowerment (i.e., student as super-hero) or creative writing. Comic books present a low-cost, accessible, familiar, and highly engaging medium to guide, entertain, and inspire students in many areas.

Berkowitz (1996) designed an informal study wherein student pictures were shown to three judges. The judges evaluated how eight pictures from two groups of cartooning art students demonstrated a "good grasp" of the following art principles: figure drawing, drawing the face, movement/action, color, and humor. While both groups of students received art training using materials from fine art master reproductions, anatomical studies, and photographs, in the experimental group comic books were emphasized as the



With names from classical art, Michelangelo, Donatello, Raphael, and Leonardo fight evil in Image Comics' popular *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.™ © Mirage Studios, artwork by Erik Larsen (per Image Comics).



Above: *Untitled*, 1985, by Roger Shimomura.
60" by 72" acrylic.

Left: *Kabuki Play*, 1985, by Roger Shimomura.
21" by 29" lithograph.

Below: *Untitled*, 1987, by Roger Shimomura.
24" by 60" acrylic.



source material for training. While the study sample was too small for extensive analysis, the evaluators tended to pick drawings from the experimental group as ones they liked best and photos of drawings from the control group as ones they liked least, based on art principles. Based on the results obtained from this questionnaire, it appears that comic books could be useful as a tool in teaching art.

Comic History

Cartooning, as the use of images for revealing stories, can be traced back as far as the history of human beings. Prehistoric people painted narratives of animals and hunting scenes on the walls of their caves (Hogben, 1949). Another precursor of today's comic books came about 5000 years ago when Egyptians drew cartoons of animals on limestone and papyrus (Estren, 1993). The history of comics is profoundly linked to the history of art, a history of how to tell a story in pictures and words with a variety of materials. The first political cartoon in this country appears to have been a wood-cut illustration produced by Benjamin Franklin for a pamphlet called *Plain Talk* in 1747 (Estren, 1993). Early cartoons purely for entertainment began in the late 19th century.

From 1915-1928, the development of a nationwide syndication began (Hogben, 1949). Adventure strips such as *Tarzan* began to appear (Savage, 1990). In the early 1930s, comic strips in a book format were produced and used to increase the sales of various products.

The first comic book ever published in the United States is in question. Estren (1993) considers *Famous Funnies*, published in 1934, to be the first comic book. Hill (1997) claims *The Yellow Kid*, published in 1897, was the first comic book. The first comic book to contain original material was *New Fun Comics* published in 1935 by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson ("The Major").

In May of 1939 Detective Comics published the first Batman story, created by Bob Kane with a costume based upon a drawing that Leonardo Da Vinci made of a flying machine (Kane, 1989).

Comic books have reflected contemporary society in their focus and intended readers. In 1941, Captain America became the first comic book hero to fight the Axis Powers. Wonder Woman, created by a psychologist named William Moulton Marston as the first female super-hero, appeared in 1941 in *All Star Comics*. In the winter of 1942-1943, *Archie* began as the first comic book intended especially for teenagers (Savage, 1990).

Comics code. In 1948, Frederic Wertham began claiming that comic books were harmful for children. He charged that there was a direct link between juvenile delinquency, illiteracy, and comic books. That year, there were comic book burnings in Binghamton, (New York), New York City, and Chicago (Hogben, 1949). The Senate Judiciary Subcommittee was created in 1953 to investigate causes of juvenile delinquency and began reviewing comic books (Savage, 1990).

In 1954 Wertham published *Seduction of The Innocent* and claimed that prolonged exposure to comic books caused delinquency. During that same year, The Comics Code Authority began

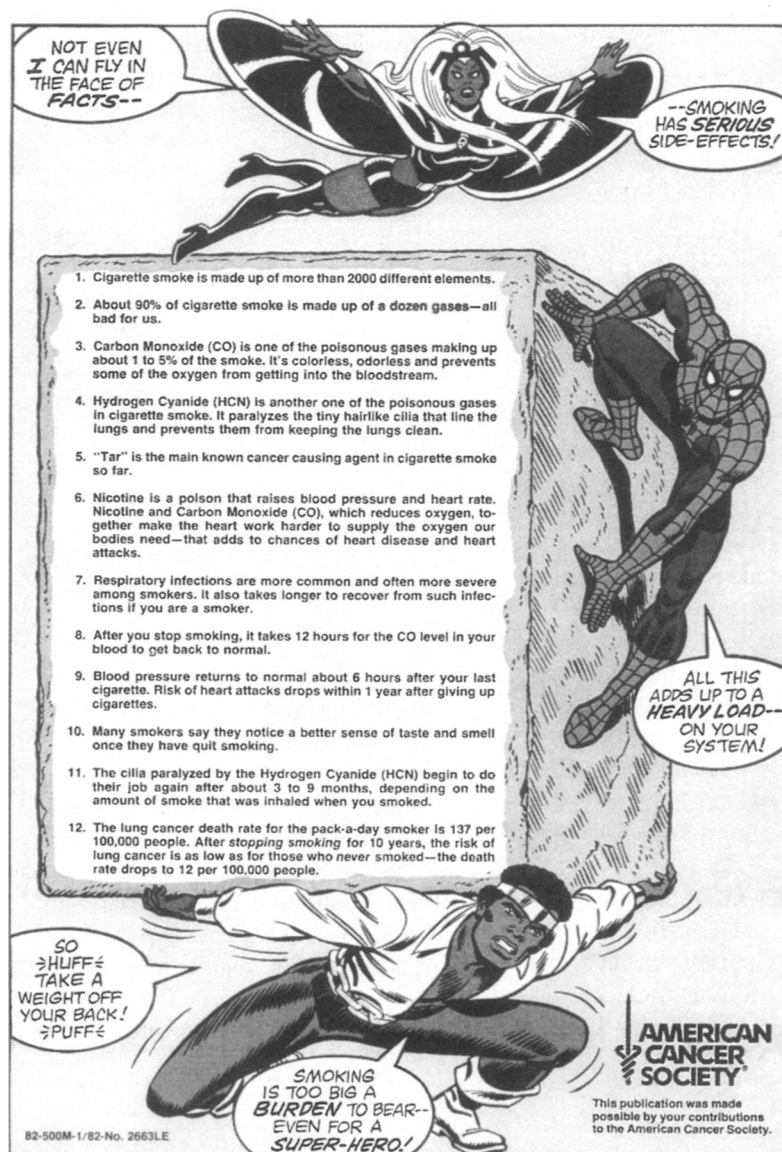
as a self-imposed regulation of the comic book industry. The code provided guidelines on acceptable content in comic books. Modern art instructors should be aware of the profound issues of controversy and social consequences related to comic book content—in particular as they relate to rules and expectations about appropriate materials for use in specific school settings. These can be used in discussion with students about censorship and artist responsibility.

Not all educators agreed with Wertham's premise that comic books

were harmful. Lindgren (1976) stated that the relationship between comic books and juvenile delinquency did not stand up under investigation. Lindgren cited a study by Paul Blakely (1958) that found little connection between comic books and poor behavior.

Comics also have been an opportunity for the presentation of traditionally underrepresented segments of society. Marvel Comics began producing comic books with Asian characters (e.g., Shogun Warriors). During the 1970s, Marvel Comics had been experimenting with various African-American

Readers learn about the dangers of cigarette smoking from the superhero Spiderman™ in this Marvel comic.



superheroes (e.g. The Black Panther and Luke Cage) and female superheroes (e.g. Shanna the She-Devil) (Daniels, 1991).

Since the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, many new independent companies have been publishing comic books. Many of these independent publishers have been producing comic books without the comic code seal of approval. Comic books without the comic code seal have been selling as well as other comics, and this has led to an increase in the number of violent comic books.

In modern times, the impact of technology on comic books has been profound. *Shatter* was the first comic book created entirely on computer. Three-dimensional graphics and holography have become commonplace to contemporary cartoon aficionados.

Comics have been used to educate readers on fine art and social issues, too. In 1995, D.C. Comics began producing a comic book series titled *Chiaroscuro: The Private Lives of Leonardo Da Vinci*. The series was based upon the life of Leonardo Da Vinci and possible adventures that might have taken place during his lifetime. Topics from child sexual abuse to land mines have been presented in comic format because of the power and popularity of the medium. A few diverse examples show how comic books have been used for: empowering young girls in Africa (Bald, 1998); encouraging 7th to 12th graders to use education-to-career/workforce development programs in Indiana ("Indiana's new superheroes," 1998); educating villagers and urban dwellers in Afghanistan (Skuse, 1997); training students in conflict resolution ("Illustrate conflict resolution with cartoons," 1996) and teaching young adults about the environment (Elsasser, 1994).

Comic Art Analysis

Teachers can present a variety of art analysis principles via comic books and cartoons. Reviewing a single comic book with a class, the students can learn perspective, figure drawing, criteria for judging quality, standards for originality and writing, composition on page (layout), and other concepts that can apply to different art styles.

Comic art also offers unique aspects for analysis and skill building. Many comic books convey a story-line through several pages of visual art. Freeman (1997/1998) notes this advantage in the context of learning "graphic literacies" and other aspects of visual and story skill development for children and adults. Therefore, concepts such as sequencing, relation of story to characters (thematically and visually), and consistency of the character's look throughout the comic book are critically important.

Artists use many different skills to make comic books that can have benefits for learning in general (e.g., computer programming). In addition, using professionally produced cartoon images can present possible careers in comic art for students. Valuable resources on comic art careers are available, including writing (Haines, 1995) and illustration (Malloy, 1993).

Lesson Plan

The accompanying lesson plan—titled "The Stuff that Heroes are Made Of"—introduces the use of comic art in the classroom. With some modifications, it can be used with all ages and with limited resources. *Art and Man* (1984) also contains workshop instructions for using comic books in the classroom, along with several articles that link comics to fine art.

Comic books can also be adapted for opportunities for teachers to work with

other adults. Using creative problem solving and art, comic books can be created that relate informative or inspiring messages. Examples could include preparing flyers for student activities; designing handouts for staff meetings or conferences; and creating portfolios for parents to see their child's work and progress. Imagine the possibilities for spicing up even the most tedious administrative reports with cartoons and comic images!

Cautions

Because of the popularity, variety, and graphic content of comic books, we offer the following cautions for instructors as they choose comic art. Always review any comics before they are brought into use in the class. Keep in mind the following guidelines:

1. Avoid comic art with nudity, inappropriate language, swearing, graphic/gory violence, and offensive portrayals of principal, teachers, or other groups known to students.
2. If you think the principal or regular classroom teacher might have a problem with comic books in school, review with them the materials you have selected prior to meeting with students.
3. Decide when you should bring in comic art and when students can bring their own examples.
4. Note that the artist who draws the cover may be different from the artist who drew the pictures for the story inside the comic book—identify all artists responsible in image creation (if it is possible for you to determine this).
5. If looking at historical cartoons that may be offensive today, describe them in a proper context (e.g.; "In the past, some artists used to do this, but it is considered offensive by many today.")

APPENDIX I: Sample Lesson Plan for Teachers and Trainers

Lesson Plan:

The Stuff Heroes Are Made Of: A Lesson in Figure Drawing

This lesson introduces students to the basics of figure drawing. In cartooning, "Everything is based on how you draw the characters: the heroes, villains, and the never-ending hordes of supporting stars." (Lee & Buscema, 1978, p. 42)

Students' needs and interests:

Students need to:

1. Understand the myths and beliefs of various cultures.
2. Explore the creative possibilities cartooning has to offer.
3. Create things with their hands.
4. Explore and express their views of their self and the world around them as related to their stage of artistic development.
5. Develop a positive self-image and pride in their culture.

Preparation:

1. Materials—rulers, T-squares, etc.
2. Questions to prompt thinking: What makes someone a hero? Not just strength and super-powers—super villains have these too!
3. Make blank books—fold in half and staple 2-4 sheets, can use special glossy paper for cover.
4. Judging criteria for comic books
 - a. At least a certain number of different characters.
 - b. Use all pages
 - c. Follow directions
 - d. Flexibility of judge—not only did students follow directions but they were also creative
 - e. Completed on time.
 - f. Did in color—use all materials

Materials: Pencils, paper (12" by 18"), and markers.
(Comic books—reviewed by instructor prior to class.)

Specific Objectives:

Appreciation: Students will develop an awareness of figure drawing by viewing and discussing classical examples.

Perception: Students will perceive important principles of proportion.

Conception: Students will develop an understanding of the idea of figure drawing.

Expression: Students will express their personal ideas by creating a super-hero that relates to their lives and interests.

Integration: Students will reinforce reading and speaking skills (kids stand and tell their stories), as well as history and culture lessons.

Skill: Students will solve various problems of figure drawing.

Cleanup: Students will clean up and maintain and respect tools and materials.

Student and Teacher

Evaluations: Develop a critical awareness through review of drawing techniques and final comics by various students.

Timing: Allow time at the end of the class period for cleanup and evaluating.

Procedures: Create a character that has meaning for you. This character can look like you or may be a hero from your culture. Notice that often superheroes have exaggerated muscles, broad shoulders, etc. "Perhaps the most important single point to remember is that you should always slightly exaggerate the heroic qualities of your hero" (Lee & Buscema 1978, p.46). After creating your hero, "Check for accurate proportions and correct angles of arms and legs so that a person's posture clearly communicates a message" (Hubbard & Zimmerman, 1982, p.56). "Body language" is another means of communicating feelings and emotions. Think about various body positions you have observed, without seeing a person's face, and try to remember what these positions have communicated to you.

Time: 15 minutes for discussion and demonstration, 10 minutes for work sheets, 35 minutes for work, 10 minutes cleanup, 5 minutes evaluation, 5 minutes for overlap in other areas = 80 minutes.

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6. Know the value of comics that you use (through price guides or conversation with knowledgeable collectors and sellers)—try to use low cost materials (Many comic stores have low cost comic bins.)
7. Learn about different types of comic artists:

- a. Penciler—draws the original artwork.
- b. Inker—goes over pencil art and adds shadows/crosshatches.
- c. Color artist—adds color in artwork.
- d. Created by—who thought of the concept for the comic.
- e. Writers/editors.

- f. Story.
- g. Layouts.
- h. Finisher.
- i. Lettering.
- j. Chief/producer/publisher.
- k. Editor.

Jay Berkowitz is a teacher, poet and cartoonist in Cleveland, Ohio. As an independent consultant, Todd Packer provides research, writing, and training in creative problem solving and cross-cultural communication for universities, professional associations, and other organizations.

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